DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 414 137 RC 021 283

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TITLE	The Twelve Steps Experientially.
PUB DATE	1997-11-00
NOTE	9p.; In: Deeply Rooted, Branching Out, 1972-1997. Annual AEE International Conference Proceedings; see RC 021 269.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Alcoholism; Counseling; Drug Addiction; *Drug Rehabilitation; *Experiential Learning; Learning Activities; *Therapy
IDENTIFIERS	Alcoholics Anonymous; *Experiential Therapy; Spirituality; *12 Step Programs

ABSTRACT

Experiential activities provide each participant with the ability to see, feel, and experience whatever therapeutic issue the facilitator is addressing, and usually much more. This paper presents experiential activities to address the 12 steps of recovery adopted from Alcoholics Anonymous. These 12 steps are used worldwide for many other recovery programs and substitutions are made, replacing the word alcoholism or alcoholic with addiction or addict. The 12 steps are presented, along with the principles behind them: honesty, hope, faith, courage, integrity, willingness, humility, brotherly love, discipline, perseverance, connection with God, and giving back to others. Experiential activities are described that promote reflection on and understanding of each of these principles. As a training exercise, these activities provide opportunities for participants to encounter the same kinds of feelings experienced by people in recovery in the course of working the 12 steps. (Author/TD)

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The Twelve Steps Experientially

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ABSTRACT

Experiential activities provide each participant with the ability to see, feel, and experience whatever therapeutic issue the facilitator is addressing, and usually much more. This presentation is focused on using experiential activities to address the 12 steps of recovery adopted from Alcoholics Anonymous. Please note that these 12 steps are used worldwide for many other recovery programs and therefore, substitutions are made, replacing the word alcoholism or alcoholic with addiction or addict. The following is a brief overview of each of the 12 steps as well as a description of the experiential activity to be facilitated. The goal is to provide opportunities for each participant to encounter the same kinds of feelings with which people, in recovery, must cope, in the course of working the 12 steps.

Step 1: "Admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable."

Honesty is the principle behind the first step. Individuals look at all the negative consequences that have happened in their lives as a result of using alcohol. The "we" concept is emphasized in that the difference between alcoholism and other diseases is that the alcoholic cannot do it alone or get better by themselves. Working the first step means identifying that there is a problem and that it is alcohol.

The experiential activity is "OUT OF CONTROL," which, among other things, provides the participants with the opportunity to experience powerlessness and unmanageability. The group stands in spotting position around an individual in the middle of the circle. The individual is given a stick, which is symbolic of his/her addiction and is directed to hold the stick directly over his/her head, while naming the addiction. The individual is directed to turn around ten

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(10) times, while not taking their eyes off of the addiction (the stick). Once he or she has completed this, they are to slowly place the stick on the ground and walk over it. The focus is on the illusion of control and the paradox of the dependence on alcohol for power.

Step 2: "Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity."

Hope is the principle behind the second step. Emphasis is on the need for external support and an open mind. This step can be somewhat threatening to individuals who have always been self-serving in getting their needs met. Many people in recovery use Alcoholics Anonymous as the power greater than themselves as a beginning.

The experiential activity is "OUT OF CONTROL," and is done in conjunction with the first step, with the focus this time being on the group's support, both physically and emotionally. Emphasis is on the individual taking a risk to receive external support.

Step 3: "Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him."

The principle behind this step is faith. Emphasis is on a willingness to reach out: a behavior that is unfamiliar to the alcoholic who holds things in close to self. The individual needs to discover the relationship between trust in self and a faith in something, beyond self, which can evoke the energy required for him or her to continue his or her striving. The individual's higher power can be anything that he or she needs it to be and it can change as he or she needs it to change.

The experiential activity is "CREATIONS" and is done in conjunction with the first two steps and "OUT OF CONTROL." Each participant is asked to use playdough to create, a) his/her concept of a higher power and what it might look like and, b) the feelings that surfaced for him/her while experiencing "OUT OF CONTROL" and what they may look like. This is a nonverbal activity so participants are encouraged to focus on themselves and their creations. Letting go of feelings via the playdough is processed afterwards and participants are encouraged to share their creations with the group. Reminding the individuals that they let go of some control and trusted the group while doing "OUT OF CONTROL" may be beneficial at this time.

Step 4: "Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves."

Courage is the principle behind this step. This inventory is a summary of the individual's best and worst experiences in life. It is a true confession of what they are, without any masks. It is important to understand that through dealing with painful experiences of the past, the individual can begin to grow and have a better future.

The experiential activity is called "TAKING STOCK." Each participant makes a list of personality traits they possess, both positive and negative. Individuals are reminded that by discovering what their emotional deformities are, they can move toward their correction.

Step 5: "Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs."

The principle behind this step is integrity and involves the sharing of the fourth step. This step assists in eliminating isolation and loneliness. The individual begins allowing him or herself to be vulnerable; for this is the beginning of true kinship with man and God as the individual understands God. The experien-

tial activity is "THANK YOU, WHAT ARE YOU?" and is done in conjunction with the fourth step where the group splits into pairs, and each pair sits across from one another, giving 100% eye contact throughout the activity. One person begins by stating, "I am __. The other person states, "Thank you, what are you?" The person that started says again, "I am ___." Again the other person says, "Thank you, what are you?" This occurs for approximately three minutes at which time the two individual's switch roles. Emphasis is placed on the individuals willingness to move in the direction of being at one with man and God.

Step 6: "We are entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character."

The principle behind this step is willingness. This step emphasizes the individual having the best possible attitude in order to make a beginning on this lifetime job. This is about progress, not perfection, for after all, these defects of character have been built on for years.

The experiential activity is "HUMAN KNOT." The group stands in a circle and each individual puts one hand in the circle and takes hold of someone else's hand without holding the hands of the individuals next to him or her. The same is repeated for the other hand until the group is in a knot. Participants are to observe the wreckage (knot) and be willing to get out of it. The focus is on willingness and the participants being ready. It is beneficial to note that recovering individuals often are comfortable in knots or chaos and doing this step means leaving their comfort zone. Participants are also reminded that their higher power is not going to magically make the knot go away without their willingness to put forth effort and footwork.

Step 7: "Humbly asked him to remove our shortcomings."

The principle behind this step is humility. "The seventh step is where we make a change in our attitude which permits us, with humility as our guide, to move out from ourselves toward others and toward God" (*Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of AA*, p. 76). Taking action is emphasized.

The experiential activity is "HUMAN KNOT" and is done in conjunction with the sixth step. The goal is for the individuals to get untangled without letting go of each other's hands. When the participants begin trying to get out of the knot, they begin with God's guidance, to work this step. The discussion afterwards should center around humility and allowing for external assistance. Individual shortcomings may come up in the discussion, which is beneficial; however, remind them that progress, not perfection, is the AA way of growing.

Step 8: "Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all."

The principle behind this step is brotherly love and puts forgiveness into a new perspective. Harm is defined here as physical, spiritual, mental, or emotional damage done to people. The emphasis is on the recovering person's behavior, not the other person involved.

The experiential activity is "MY SIDE OF THE STREET." The participants are asked to think of a relationship that they have had with another person where there have been many struggles. They are then asked to focus on what went wrong in the relationship. Then, using a rope, the facilitator makes a line on the ground symbolizing a street. One side of the street belongs to the other party in their relationship. The participants are asked to stand on the other party's side of the street. They are then asked to name the behaviors that the other person did to cause the relationship to go bad. Every participant can do this together

or one by one. The facilitator then explains to them that working the eighth step means focusing only on their behaviors, or their side of the street, and not on the behaviors of others.

Step 9: "Made direct amends to such people whenever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others."

The principle behind the 9th step is discipline. The qualities needed when doing this step involve a careful sense of timing, courage, and prudence. A reminder that the individual cannot buy his or her own peace of mind, at the expense of others, is beneficial. "The readiness to take the full consequences of our past acts, and to take responsibility for the well-being of others at the same time, is the very spirit of step nine" (*Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of AA*, p. 87).

The experiential activity is "MY SIDE OF THE STREET" and is done in conjunction with step eight. The focus here is on the recovering person and his/her behaviors and responsibilities. Giving them an opportunity to stand on their side of the street and verbally state their part in the relationship and state where they may have been neglectful in their responsibilities is a wonderful chance for them to practice making amends.

Step 10: "Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it."

The principle behind this step is perseverance. This involves the attempt of putting the AA way of living into practical use, looking at the individual's assets and liabilities. It can be done at the end of each day or as occurrences happen, remembering that the individual has a part in everything that happens to

him or her. Emphasis is placed on the individual having the willingness to admit when he or she is at fault.

Experiential activity is "MY TOWER" and requires a blindfold for each participant. Each participant is given a pile of rocks (fairly flat) or blocks which symbolize themselves. The goal is to have each participant build his/her tower. Each time the tower falls, the participant is to continue trying, being aware of any mistakes or faults in order for him/her to use his/her experiences in re-attempting to build the tower. Remind individuals about "progress, not perfection."

Step 11: "Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood him, praying only for the knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out."

The principle behind step eleven is God. It is beneficial to remind the participants that meditation has no boundaries and can always be further developed. It is an individual adventure and the object is always the same: to improve one's conscious contact with God as one understands God. When praying, the focus is much the same; however, reminding individuals to pray for God's will, not theirs, to be done for themselves, as well as others, may also be beneficial.

The experiential activity for Step 11 is a "NATURE WALK." While walking, encourage the participants to pay attention to things they may take for granted or simply look over, such as the many colors found in one flower and how symmetrical the colors and shapes really are. Encourage them to look high in the canopy of trees and feel the power of their place in that reality. Encourage them to look for insects and birds and ponder the reality of these living things, as well as their color and sounds. The focus here is allowing the participants to feel the presence of a higher power, or God. During the discussion afterwards, read pages

86–88, from *Alcoholics Anonymous*, starting with the second paragraph. Encouraging the participants to read this on a daily basis would be beneficial as well.

Step 12: "Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs."

The principle behind this step is love and service. The most important thing about having a spiritual awakening is that the recovering individual has become able to do, feel, and believe that which he or she could not do on his or her resources alone. Focus on giving back to others that which was freely given to each recovering individual. Emphasis is also on practicing the principals of the AA lifestyle in all the individual's affairs.

The experiential activity is "GIVING." The participants sit in a circle and are each given a small piece of playdough. They are then asked to love their piece of playdough with every bit of love they can gather. Allow for approximately one or two minutes and remind the participants that this is a nonverbal activity. Ask one individual to give his or her playdough, or love, to the person next to them. Ask that person to mix the love or playdough together and then pass that love to the next person. This is continued until everybody has given away love. The one piece of playdough is then passed around the circle. Encourage all participants to focus on how the love feels when they receive it and give it away. Then, pass the playdough around one last time, allowing each individual to take a piece of love back until everyone has received love through giving it.

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